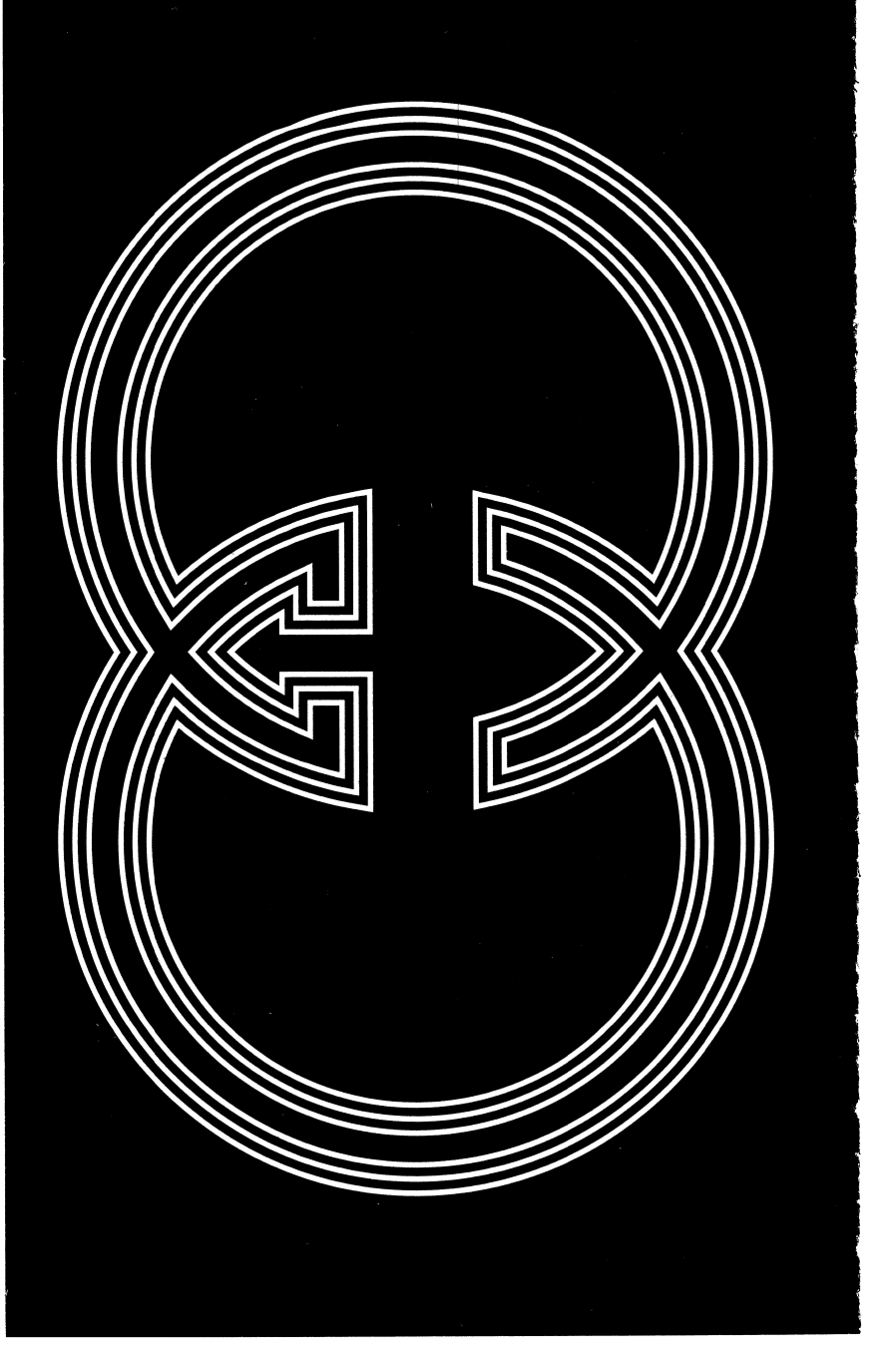

Akinola Davies Jr. (ADJ)

Akinola Davies Jr. is a UK-based filmmaker with a unique ability to portray socio-political issues through a lush, dream-like lens. His work with artists like Blood Orange and brands like Gucci and Kenzo merge the vibrancy of his Nigerian roots with the grit of his hometown of London. His 2018 work *Boot/leg* portrays individuals and groups in bootleg fashion: purses, jewelry, and hijabs patterned with logos from high end luxury brands. Through these intimate portraits, Davies Jr. explores the often unspoken relationships between brand, garment, culture, and status. Interview by Ben Schwartz and Jasio Stefanski (BS/JS), 2020

> BS/JS: We arrived at your practice through your project *Boot/leg*. Could you begin by giving us more context about that piece?

ADJ: *Boot/leg* was my first solo show in Basel, Switzerland at One Point One, a gallery that primarily represents and works with minority artists. I saw the show as an opportunity to situate the culture I saw around me within the context of fashion. The piece was a nine-minute film centered on individuals wearing bootlegged clothing, all framed within the tropes

of the fashion industry: muzak, a high-gloss aesthetic, sumptuous color, slick production et cetera. I was interested in featuring a more grassroots-level of fashion through people that high-end industry doesn't usually cater to. These groups of people, however, are very interested in fashion, in these brands and products, and oftentimes insert themselves into the narrative by creating and wearing bootlegs.

> BS/JS: So with the piece, you were not only thinking about the actual objects, but also the systems and contexts that surround these bootleg items?

ADJ: Exactly. I was interested in the cyclical way that fashion finds and exploits trends. These trends often come from the street, are picked up by high-end fashion houses, and then sold at exorbitant prices. Because of their inaccessibility, the street then makes bootlegs of these items, demonstrating demand, and giving more value to the original.

But what's unfortunate is how the fashion industry refuses to have a real dialogue with the communities from which they steal. As a result these communities are creating things for no one but themselves, which inevitably makes these items much more interesting.

> BS/JS: We'd love for you to expand on that relationship—how does bootlegging create, preserve, and even empower disenfranchised communities?

ADJ: Clothes are very coded and are often used as identity signifiers of a particular group. In *Boot/leg*,

for example, special attention is placed on the hijab. Clothes of course are also symbols of status and hierarchy within a community; what you wear dictates your position and how others perceive you. In that way, clothes, and bootlegs, become important in creating communities.

But bootlegging itself is its own community or ecosystem: designers, manufacturers, vendors, and consumers. So really you have communities at play, based around commerce, around design, around style, around association. It's so layered on so many levels.

> BS/JS: I wonder how the relationship between these various levels and tiers that you talk about affects what might be considered bootlegging and what might be considered appropriation?

ADJ: Dapper Dan is a great example of this. He garnered attention for his bootlegs of Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Prada, et cetera, but was never welcome in that sphere. Then, of course, years later Gucci bootlegged one of Dapper Dan's designs and sort of claimed Dapper Dan as one of their own. So in that situation it becomes a case of appropriation, versus Dan who was making bootlegs.

I think control and power greatly affect the appropriation vs. bootlegging conversation. And the wonderful aspect of bootlegging is how it really democratizes the narrative of fashion. The people making these items are doing so with very limited resources and perhaps a limited education, and in a way bootlegging becomes a means of education. And now

pp. 310–311: Akinola Davies, Still from *Boot/Leg* (2018)

you have companies understanding bootlegging as a complete art form in and of itself. Gucci, for example, released an official version of a bootleg shirt. I just think bootleggers are ingenious, I am eager to see how they will continue to evolve and become more clever in the manner in which they create and distribute.

> BS/JS: As we talk about issues of cultural appropriation, and varying power dynamics, do you see bootlegging as a strategy for minority communities to subvert oppressive power structures?

ADJ: I think ultimately with bootlegging that minority communities have the ability to centralize themselves in how they choose to tell their stories. Beyond bootleg clothing, I am interested in how these communities might bootleg oppressive systems, and how that can be an act of empowerment. For example, growing up in Nigeria I was always really fascinated and impressed by these kids who would learn to use computers and send emails across the world to get money from people. All of this was based on their understanding of how to infiltrate and subvert various systems. It has a very bootleg mindset—it's ingenious—I think that sort of initiative should be celebrated.

> BS/JS: As brands become more aware of these communities, possibly from the result of bootlegging, do you see a way for these structures and communities to work together in an equitable way?

ADJ: Unequivocally there is a way to do it, but I think when you're dealing with big brands, you start

engaging more in conversations about profit. For capitalism to work, some people have to be exploited, and so I'm not sure how interested these brands are in having these types of conversations.

Brands need to be more ethically minded in the way they engage with communities. And actually, I think the reason why a lot of communities end up bootlegging is because there isn't that representation within the hierarchy of those systems. I think ultimately that's the starting point. It's about inclusion in the earlier stages of production and planning to affect how and what things are made to account for a broader range of people. And I think if brands really want to engage then there needs to be more structured systems in regards to how to engage, which once again boils down to funding, access, education, et cetera.

BS/JS: So in many ways, bootlegging becomes this vehicle for access...

ADJ: Right. For communities who are left out of the more mainstream narrative, they are forced to adjust and find ways to insert themselves into that narrative. It can be through fashion, it can be through the internet, and I think that has been instrumental in this democratization process.

A friend of mine used to do this project called Photocopy Club because he was fully aware that he could never open up his own gallery. He would write to artists and he would get them to send him a print, and then he would photocopy loads, and he would do a show where people would just buy art straight off the walls. I thought this was a nice example of

pp. 314–315: Akinola Davies, Still from *Boot/Leg* (2018)

bootlegging as access—access to an artistic space, access to a community, access to a product.

BS/JS: Throughout your work, it seems like you're interested in celebrating points of intersection, especially between things that wouldn't normally interact.

ADJ: I'm really interested in how different generations or cultures speak to each other, especially with the internet and the way things seem to more fluidly mix. I'm interested in finding and surfacing things that unite various communities. In my work I try to play with context, hoping that people can see themselves in areas they may have never expected. I made a film called *Zaza* in Northern Nigeria based around this 500-year-old equestrian festival. A friend from Palestine was surprised about the symmetry of the film and its relationship to Afghani, or Palestinian, or different areas of Muslim culture. People might never see those relationships unless they watch the film. There's so much code that people wouldn't understand.

Most of what I'm really interested in is how to create more dialogue and how to bring different groups of people together to understand—whether it's generationally, whether it's culturally, whether it's racially—what unites us.

BS/JS: Do you see bootlegging as a viable form of activism?

ADJ: Yes, I think the next iteration of bootlegging is very much centered on activism. On one hand, I think bootlegging has always been a form of protest, but I think more recently you've seen an iteration that is

much more overt. There is a group of guys called Hype-Peace who basically bootlegged the Palace Skateboarding logo, donating all proceeds to various Middle Eastern causes. Or someone like Jonny Banger, who initially bootlegged a lot of Polo and Ralph Lauren , and in his more recent work, has been attacking the British government during the pandemic.

> BS/JS: Today, bootlegging feels increasingly at risk for becoming a passing design trend. At its core, what power or effect can the act have in this present moment?

ADJ: I think what happens is that the design community is very consumed with trends without much understanding of their greater connection to the outside world. Trends are so quickly consumed and disposed of without allowing any room to evolve. I see at the core of this bootlegging trend a sense of ingenuity and a sense of industry from people working with limited resources. It's almost an evolutionary process, if you can figure out how to make something from nothing, you will last. In places like Africa they are forced to be creative with what they have, and that to me is the core of innovation.

Title page (p. 306): Outlined version of the Gucci monogram